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“Reason, Pure and Simple?” There is No Such Thing

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Steven Pinker, Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, recently responded to the Report of the Committee on General Education at the university. That committee called for several changes in the undergraduate curriculum, including a core course on “faith and reason.”

Professor Pinker’s response, published in The Harvard Crimson, is most revealing. Consider this passage:

My second major reservation concerns the “Reason and Faith” requirement. First, the word “faith” in this and many other contexts, is a euphemism for “religion.” An egregious example is the current administration’s “faith-based initiatives,” so-named because it is more palatable than “religion-based initiatives.” A university should not try to hide what it is studying in warm-and-fuzzy code words.

Second, the juxtaposition of the two words makes it sound like “faith” and “reason” are parallel and equivalent ways of knowing, and we have to help students navigate between them. But universities are about reason, pure and simple. Faith—believing something without good reasons to do so—has no place in anything but a religious institution, and our society has no shortage of these. Imagine if we had a requirement for “Astronomy and Astrology” or “Psychology and Parapsychology.” It may be true that more people are knowledgeable about astrology than about astronomy, and it may be true that astrology deserves study as a significant historical and sociological phenomenon. But it would be a terrible mistake to juxtapose it with astronomy, if only for the false appearance of symmetry.

The basic antipathy to “faith” reflected in Professor Pinker’s comments will come as no surprise to those familiar with his writings. Notice that he simply dismisses faith as “believing something without good reasons to do so.”

What is most striking about this article is Pinker’s assertion that the modern university in general, and Harvard University in particular, is “about reason, pure and simple.”

Pure and simple? This is a stunning claim. Does Dr. Pinker really believe that his own mind is capable of operating by “pure and simple” reason alone? Reason is an amazing gift, and the proper utilization of reason is essential for any education, but we are complicated creatures whose minds are never simply or purely rational.

Every human thought emerges within a context of mental presuppositions—a dimension of thought that is, as philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga affirm, *pre-rational*. Furthermore, we are creatures whose minds are compromised by emotional states, nonrational operations, and other impediments to the “pure and simple” operation of reason.

Reason “pure and simple” simply does not exist in the human mind, and it is an academic conceit to believe that it does. A dangerous and self-deceptive conceit.

SEE ALSO: “Report Recasts the Core,” The Harvard Crimson, October 4, 2006. Previous report on curricular review, Harvard College of Arts and Sciences, November 2005.

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